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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MINSK 000745

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [BO](#)

SUBJECT: MILINKEVICH UPBEAT, FOCUSING ON EUROPEAN FUTURE
FOR BELARUS

REF: A. MINSK 522

[1](#)B. MINSK 414

[1](#)C. MINSK 508

[1](#)D. MINSK 724

Classified By: Charge Jonathan Moore for reason 1.4 (d).

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) Belarusian opposition leader Aleksandr Milinkevich complained to post that GOB authorities' repression of freedom of association reached new heights. Despite the harassment, he will continue to try to meet supporters and civic activists throughout Belarus. Milinkevich remains clearly focused on social movements with a European focus rather than on next year's parliamentary elections. End summary.

Authorities Raise the Level of Intimidation

[1](#)2. (C) Leader of the For Freedom (FF) movement (refs A and B) Aleksandr Milinkevich told Charge and Acting Pol/Econ Chief on August 29 that authorities were pushing the limits of aggressiveness in prohibiting meetings of opposition activists. On August 28, he met fifteen local activists in Iryanets (population 5,000) in Minsk oblast for two hours before police broke up the meeting and demanded identification from all participants. Milinkevich said on August 29 the head of the district police called in all meeting participants to ask for a written statement. Milinkevich fears the police will use any statements to bring charges of holding an unsanctioned meeting.

[1](#)3. (C) Milinkevich said he would travel on August 30 to Brest to protest charges of attending an unsanctioned meeting brought against local activists. He said authorities intend to scare away potential supporters. To illustrate that in some cases they succeed, Milinkevich recounted a recent visit to a market in which most vendors he knows by name avoided eye contact with the former presidential candidate because they feared future harassment if they as much as greeted him.

Independent Press Practicing Self-Censorship Out of Fear

[1](#)4. (C) Thanking the Embassy for a consistent presence at political trials, Milinkevich also extended gratitude for U.S. support for small regional publications, noting that larger independent publications resorted to self-censorship more and more in order to stave off further harassment from authorities. Given this, he saw value in small bulletins

with nothing to lose from publishing the unvarnished truth. Milinkevich argued in favor of satellite television, but emphasized that small regional publications could form the nucleus of future civic activism.

Students Have the Least to Fear

15. (C) Milinkevich said youth activism was on the upswing in large part because students had the least to fear. The opposition succeeded in placing all repressed students in universities abroad, where they could receive a higher quality education. He suggested that the majority of those studying abroad would return, although perhaps only when change was near, and form the core of Belarus' democratic elite.

16. (C) The politicization of Protestants and to a lesser extent Catholics also drives youth activism, according to Milinkevich. He noted that while previously Protestant leaders avoided meetings, now they seek him out.

Split in Opposition Based on Russia, not Milinkevich

17. (C) Milinkevich mentioned his August 29 meeting with United Democratic Forces (UDF) Co-Chair Anatoliy Lebedko. Milinkevich said FF would look for ways to support UDF candidates in 2008 parliamentary elections. He advised Lebedko that the UDF should set aside some parliamentary nominations for non-partisan activists, noting that Belarusian Women's League Head Nina Stuzhinskaya said ten independent female activists would like to run for parliament. Milinkevich argued that FF could not prevent its supporters from running for parliament, although he

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reiterated his movement would not seek to promote its own candidates and would focus on the "European March" in October instead.

18. (C) The FF leader claimed the opposition could not ignore the issue of whether Belarus should align its future towards Russia or the EU, averring that the Belarusian Party of Communists (BPC) leader Sergey Kalyakin did not have a vision of Belarus in Europe. Milinkevich called the issue fundamental and said voters would not settle for reassurances that the opposition would decide their stance only once they came to power. He regretted not having stated his pro-European position clearly during the 2006 presidential campaign. (Comment: Whoever is currently advising Milinkevich, it is refreshing to see him now on a pro-Europe bandwagon -- as youth activists have been -- and less focused on more nationalist approaches to defeating Lukashenko. End comment.)

Comment: Optimistic Due to Lukashenko's Inevitable Demise

19. (C) While Milinkevich's overall popularity has faded somewhat (ref C), he still attracts loyal followers, particularly among youth activists. His public defense of Malady Front activists (ref D) will further his credentials with Belarus' youngest activists. His recent trips to the regions -- despite the almost inevitable disruptions from the authorities -- successfully demonstrate his empathy with the most minor of opposition activists. We also note that he took a moment to chat with a local guard before departing, confirming stories we have heard from his supporters that Milinkevich seeks out opportunities to connect with the public.

110. (C) Apart from his momentary swipe at BPC Chair Kalyakin, Milinkevich stayed positive throughout the meeting. Milinkevich sounded genuinely optimistic that activists studying abroad could look forward to returning to a free

Belarus. This optimism draws supporters to Milinkevich, and remains a reason why authorities try to scare off average Belarusians from attending his meetings in the regions. Hopefully Milinkevich himself realizes that looking forward with optimism will help him regain support much more surely than focusing on differences with other opposition politicians.

Moore